**Shedding the Weight of My Dad’s Obsession**

by Linda Lee Andujar

Instead of selling the Camp Fire candy, I ate it. Eight boxes of it. Each Bluebird in our fourth-grade troop was assigned 12 boxes of chocolate candy to sell for a dollar a box. I sold four boxes to my family and then ran out of ideas for selling the rest.

As the days passed and the stack of candy remained in a corner of my room, the temptation to eat it overwhelmed my conscience. Two months after we’d been given the goodies, the troop leader announced that the drive was over and we were to bring in our sales money, along with any unsold candy, to the next Tuesday meeting. I rushed home in a panic and counted $4 in my sales money envelope and 12 boxes of candy gone.

I thought of the piggy bank filled with silver dollars that my father kept on a shelf in his closet. It was a collection that he added to but never spent. I tried to push this financial resource out of my mind, but Tuesday was approaching, and I still had no money.

By Monday afternoon, I had no choice. I tiptoed into my parents’ bedroom, pulled the vanity chair from Mother’s dressing table and carried it to the walk-in closet. There was the piggy bank smiling down at me from the high shelf. After stacking boxes on the chair, I reached up and laid hands on the bank. When I had counted out eight silver dollars, I returned the pig to its place and clambered down. For days I felt bad about my theft, but what I felt even guiltier about was eating all those treats.

Throughout my childhood, my parents weighed me every day, and Daddy posted the numbers on my bedroom door. He never called me fat, but I came to learn every synonym. He discussed every health aspect of obesity endlessly. The daily tone and timber of our household was affected by Dad’s increasingly authoritarian regimes.

I remember one Friday night, months after the candy caper. I heard the garage door rumble shut, and I knew that Daddy was home. He came in the back door, kissed Mother, and asked what my weight was for the day. Mother admitted that I was still a pound over the goal he had set. “Get a pillow and a book, Linda,” he said.

He firmly ushered me into the bathroom, then shut and locked the door behind me. As the door was closing, I caught a glimpse of Mother and my sister looking on as though they were witnessing an execution. For the next two days, the only time I was allowed out was for meals. It was late Sunday evening when I was finally released from my cell, supposedly taught a lesson by my incarceration.

The bathroom episode was one skirmish in a long war that had begun when, unlike my older sister, I failed to shed the “baby fat” many children are born with. Although I was cheerful, affectionate, and good-natured, none of those qualities interested my father. He had one slender child-he meant to have two. It was simply a matter of my self-discipline.

My slightly chubby figure had become a target for my physician father’s frustration as he struggled to establish his medical practice. Dad told me constantly that if I was a pound overweight, I would be teased at school and nobody would like me. I stayed away from the other kids, fearing harsh words that never came. When I was 16, Daddy came up with the ultimate punishment: any day that I weighed more than 118 pounds (the weight my father had deemed ideal for my 5-foot, 4-inch frame) I’d have to pay him. In an attempt to shield me from this latest tactic, my exhausted, loving mother secretly took me to an internist friend of the family who prescribed what he described as “diet pills”-amphetamines and diuretics. Although the pills caused unpleasant side effects like light-headedness, taking them landed me a slim figure and, two years later, an engineer husband.

I quit the hated amphetamines at 27 and accepted my divorce as a result of my weight gain. I became a single, working mother devoted to raising my son and daughter. Over time, I realized that people liked my smile and my laugh, and contrary to my father’s predictions, didn’t shun me because of my size.

Many years ago, at my annual physical, I mentioned to my doctor that I couldn’t eat the same quantity of food that normal people eat without getting bigger. He kindly reassured me that people do indeed have different metabolisms, some more efficient than others. This discussion ultimately helped me to accept my size and shed the emotional burden carried over from my childhood.

My sister and her husband have a daughter who was pudgy as a child. They asked me what they should do about her weight “problem.” My reply, “Don’t make it an issue. Let her find her own weight level.” To their great credit, they did.